**Academic language**

‘Tools of the Trade – part of a cognitive toolbox”

There are 2 major aspects to learning a language

* **Social language -interpersonal contexts*.* Basic interpersonal communicative skills** (**BICS**) are language skills needed to interact in social situations, for example, when speaking to a friend on the telephone. BICS refers primarily to context-bound, face-to-face communication, which is used in everyday social interaction rather than with academic tasks.
* **Academic language** - learning and communicating in educational contexts. **Cognitive academic language proficiency** (CALP) is a language-related term which refers to formal academic learning

Academic language is the language needed by students to do the work in schools. It includes, for example, subject-specific vocabulary, grammar and punctuation, and conventions that are typical for a content area (e.g., essays, reports, discussions of a controversial issue.) It is important to develop students’ academic language abilities. This means that teachers’ learning objectives should **focus on language as well as on content**. Teachers can and should communicate content through means other than language, e.g., physical models, visuals, demonstrations. However, they should also develop students’ abilities to produce and understand oral and written texts typical in subject areas as well as engage in language-based tasks.

Academic language is the language used in instruction, textbooks and exams. It differs in structure and vocabulary from language used in daily social interactions. Academic language includes a (1) common vocabulary used in all disciplines, as well as a (2) technical/academic vocabulary inherent to each individual subject. In addition, academic language features more complex language and syntax (sentence structures) than everyday English. As we have seen through our work, low academic language skills are associated with low student achievement.

" Academic language is the language needed by students to understand and communicate in the academic disciplines. Academic language includes such things as specialized vocabulary, conventional text structures within a field (e.g., essays, lab reports) and other language-related activities typical of classrooms, (e.g., expressing disagreement, discussing an issue, asking for clarification). Academic language includes both [*productive and receptive modalities*](http://www.csun.edu/science/ref/language/academic-language/modalities.html)." Performance Assessment for California Teachers (PACT)

This quote also highlights the important practice around incorporating both receptive and productive skills in programmes. Reading and writing are often the focus for teachers at the senior levels. Building and reinforcing language development includes both skills and the 4 modes – (reading, writing, listening, speaking).

**What is the language demands of a learning task**

The language demands of a learning task include any of the **receptive language skills** (e.g., listening, reading) or the **productive language skills** (e.g., speaking, writing) needed by the student in order to engage in and complete the task successfully. **Language demands are so embedded in instructional activities that we may take many for granted.** When identifying the language demands of planned lessons and assessments, it is important to consider everything that the students have to do to engage in the communication related to the activity: listen to directions, read a piece of text, answer a question out loud, prepare a presentation, write a summary, respond to written questions, research a topic, talk within a small group of peers. All of these common activities create a demand for language reception or language production. Teachers cannot assume that students know what to do at each stage nor should subject teachers believe it is solely the area of the English/literacy teacher. Literacy is embedded in every subject because we ‘***Learn language, learn through language and learn about language’.*** This is made very clear in the NZC, not only on page 12 and 16 but throughout the document.

Some language demands in subject areas are related to text types, which have specific conventions with respect to format, expected content, tone, common grammatical structures (e.g., if…, then…), etc. The language demands of other tasks are not as predictable, and may vary depending on the situation, e.g., participating in a discussion or asking a question. All students, not only English Learners, have productive and receptive language development needs. Teachers should recognise the needs and develop ways of addressing these needs.

**What does developing academic language mean?**

Just as students come to school or a particular classroom with some prior knowledge and background in the content of the subject matter, they also come with some skills in communicating effectively in the academic environment or that content area. And just as part of the teacher’s responsibility is to help the students further develop their understandings and skills in the content of the subject matter, they also have to help students develop their skills in using and understanding the language structures, the text types, and the subject-specific vocabulary that are typical in the particular content area. Teachers may use a variety of methods and strategies to both explicitly teach students the models of academic language in the content area and to help them incorporate these models in their everyday classroom usage of language. For example, a social sciences teacher may highly scaffold the process of constructing an argument based on historical evidence, how to communicate an idea in an essay; or how to debate a political point of view. Or a mathematics teacher might help students understand the conventions expected for showing their problem-solving work, how to explain alternative solutions to a problem, or how to interpret mathematical symbols. **Literacy strategies/approaches** are tools that address these needs. (See the attachment with a list of strategies from ESOL on line.) It is important to stress to teachers that they understand **why** they are using the strategies/ approaches.

For text types, it is important to make the conventions explicit, often providing graphic organizers when students are first learning how to produce the text type. For less predictable language tasks, students need to understand the nature of the task and the range of possible responses and associated language. When students are just learning to use a particular form of academic language, they will need more scaffolding and support. For example, an English teacher trying to develop students’ abilities to follow up on a student comment might ask students to brainstorm different types of responses (e.g., agreement with elaboration, agreement with qualification, disagreement) together with some typical sentence starters or grammatical structures for each type of response. Zwiers, in his article *The third language of academic English 2004 in* Educational Leadership 62:4 pgs. 60-63 states that academic language is ‘the set of words, grammar, and organisational strategies used to describe complex ideas, higher-order thinking processes and abstract concepts’.

We need to make teachers understand that the content and language fit together especially when a teacher says – *I can’t do that literacy stuff because I have no time, I have so much content to cover.* It is worthwhile having this in the back of our minds when we work in schools

The most powerful influencers on learning as identified by Hattie in Visible Learning 2009 are that teachers need to

* Be directive, influential, caring and passionate about making a difference
* Know enough about their discipline to provide appropriate feedback and feedforward
* Create environments where mistakes are valued as an opportunity to develop (learn, un-learn and re-learn)
* Plan meaningful experiences moving from simple (concrete) to complex (abstract). Based on what students can do and cannot currently do and at a speed and process so students can explain learning.